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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001132

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, USAID/W FOR AFR/AA, CONSTANCE NEWMAN,
AFR/WA, MICHAEL KARBELING, GH/AA, ANN PETERSON, GH/CH,
SURVIVAL, HOPE SUKIN, OES/IHA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV EAID SOCI NI

SUBJECT: THE STATE OF PLAY: POLIO ERADICATION INITIATIVE
(PEI)

REF: ABUJA 971

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN CAMPBELL. REASONS 1.5 (B & D).

¶11. (U) Summary: The international media is reporting a surge of polio cases in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. In response, and with the support of the Nigerian Federal government, non-governmental organizations are pushing to implement the oft-delayed efforts to immunize children throughout northern Nigeria, particularly in Kano State where state and local officials have blocked or only tepidly supported recent vaccination rounds. In Kano, polio vaccination has become a political issue: support for it is associated with the West and with the Obasanjo government. Opposition to vaccination is somehow perceived as "Islamic," especially amongst Northern Muslims suspicious of the motives of the Obasanjo government. It remains to be seen whether sufficiently large number of Muslim residents of Kano state will allow their children to be vaccinated to stop the polio surge. End summary.

¶12. (U) Citing the World Health Organization (WHO) and other reputable sources, The New York Times reports on June 23, 2004 that a surge of polio cases in Nigeria - 60 cases in one week in April - was responsible for the spread of the disease to ten African countries. As of June 16, the WHO reports 257 polio cases in 29 Nigerian states since January 1, 2004. Without vaccinations in Kano, and with low-quality vaccination rounds in other, predominately Muslim states, the GON has been unable to prevent the spread of the virus to other parts of the country or abroad.

¶13. (C) In Kano State, Governor Ibrahim Shekarau, a leader of the political opposition to President Obasanjo, is suspected of cynically exploiting suspicion of vaccination for narrow political advantage. For example, Rep. Farouk Lawan, Chairman of the House Finance Committee and a representative from Kano State, told Econoff that he believed that Shekarau was using suspicion of polio vaccination to "demonize" the Obasanjo government at the time that his political mentor, ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari, is contesting the flawed 2003 presidential election in the courts. Despite his negative position on polio vaccination, we note that Governor Shekarau is widely regarded as an effective state Governor in other areas of his responsibility and not publicly associated with corruption.

¶14. (C) However, in the face of pressure from the GON and opposition to his stance from numerous international Islamic groups, Governor Ibrahim Shekarau appears to be looking for ways to back down while saving face. This will not be easy. Amongst his grass roots supporters there is residual suspicion of vaccination campaigns dating back to a late 1990's scandal involving the Western pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, which tested an anti-meningitis drug on Nigerian children without parental knowledge or consent. Building on this residual suspicion, certain political and religious leaders have attacked successfully the polio vaccination campaign. For example, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Sharia in Nigeria, Dr. Datti Mohammed, alleged that the polio vaccines proposed for Kano state were contaminated, possibly containing the HIV/AIDS virus or some chemical agent that would inhibit fertility.

¶15. (U) In response, the Nigerian Federal government sent a delegation of experts, including members of the Islamic umbrella organization Jamiatu Nasirul Islamiya (JNI) to other Muslim countries to explore how polio vaccine is manufactured and distributed. Following a visit to Indonesia, these experts publicly supported the polio vaccination program in Northern Nigeria.

¶16. (C) However, the Kano state government refused to accept these experts, recommendations, claiming that the delegation had included neither a representative from Kano State Government nor the medical doctor from Kano who initially alleged that the vaccine was contaminated. Instead, the Kano state government sent its own delegation to Indonesia. That delegation drew the same conclusions as the earlier

delegation, and recommended resumption of the vaccine campaign, but with vaccine manufactured in a Muslim country. The Permanent Secretary of Kano State, the governor's de facto chief of staff, recently told the Embassy Political Specialist that Kano State has now approved a full implementation plan for immunization using vaccine manufactured in a Muslim state. He claims that the plan has been submitted to the Federal government for final approval, and that vaccinations will resume by the end of June.

17. (C) Some GON sources continue to criticize Shekarau, claiming that the only delay in the vaccinations is his unwillingness to make a public announcement on the safety of the vaccine. Apparently, Shekarau was ready to make the public statement on June 14, but the Federal Government jumped the gun, announcing his intention ahead of time. Embarrassed and isolated, Shekarau delayed the announcement, but indicates that he is again prepared to move ahead on the issue. According to Lawan, vaccine, purchased from Indonesia, is already in the country. He says that testing is going on now in Kano and that it could be deployed "in a couple of weeks." In fact, UNICEF confirms that 40 million doses are "in the country and ready to go," with the expectation that other northern states may request the "Muslim" vaccine.

18. (C) Comment: Governor Shekarau has yet to make a forceful effort to implement the vaccination program - even with "Muslim" vaccine. The GON has tried to push the issue ahead, but Nigeria's federal system limits its power over the state governments and it is still currently meeting sufficient resistance to undermine the effectiveness of vaccination in the North. Even if the vaccination campaign resumes in the near future, northerners remain skeptical and, we predict, will be hesitant to participate. It is clear that the campaign against the vaccination campaign has been successful, and has also fostered distrust between parts of the northern public and the Federal Government. In any event, a multi-year effort will be necessary to ensure that the majority of children are vaccinated, and will require the continued support of respected traditional rulers and others to overcome popular suspicion that can be exploited by elected officials and others for narrow political advantage. ESF funding is crucial to this effort.

CAMPBELL